

# THE GULL



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 106 NO. 2 SPRING 2022

## FROM THE TREES TO THE STREET TO SAFETY: A HERON AND EGRET STORY

BY RYAN NAKANO

**O**n the corner of 12th and Harrison and along the perimeter of the Oakland Museum of California, nesting herons and egrets make a home among 10 large ficus trees. Unfortunately for many of these birds, the streets below spell danger. “The rookery in downtown Oakland is not a very healthy place for these birds to be nesting, as there is nowhere for their chicks to make the next steps into adulthood,” said Rebecca Duerr, Director of Research and Veterinary Science at International Bird Rescue.

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Black-crowned Night Herons.  
Cheryl Reynolds



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Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Bob Gunderson

Anna's Hummingbird.

SPRINGING INTO ACTION

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I think of spring as planting time. Here in the Bay Area, however, it's best to plant in the fall, so plants can take advantage of seasonal rains. I took Golden Gate Audubon's advice and planted many selections from our Plants for Birds program in October, after the first rain. While my spring-flowering currant won't bloom until next year, I expect the buckwheat and California fuchsia will bloom later this year, attracting sparrows and hummingbirds, respectively.

Spring is also the best time to see gardens and make plans for the fall, so I'm thrilled that Golden Gate Audubon is supporting Kathy Kramer's Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tours. These tours are

a spectacular way to see how beautiful gardens can be when they support local ecological processes.

In addition to the native garden tours, this time of year also marks the start of Golden Gate Audubon's annual Birdathon. While most of our birding field trips over the year are free, during this time, we charge program fees for our Birding Adventure Trips. The program fees support our educational and conservation efforts, enabling us to offer free educational programs to Title I schools in Oakland, Richmond and San Francisco and habitat restoration work around the Bay. No matter what you do, be sure to take time to reconnect with birds and your community this spring.

NEWS BRIEFS

Vehicle Donation for Eco-Ed

After four years using Carol Lewis' generously donated 2004 Volkswagon Jetta, the Eco-Ed program is in need of a vehicle in good working condition to transport supplies to and from schools and field trip destinations. Any and all leads are appreciated.

Local Osprey Rosie Returns

In February, local Osprey Rosie returned to the Whirley Crane nest to join Richmond. Rosie and Richmond are now deep into building up their nest even as nest debris erodes and ravens steal their sticks.

Diane Ross-Leech on NAS Board

A former board president for GGAS, Diane Ross-Leech was recently added as a National Audubon Society Board Member. Leech retired as Director of Environmental Policy for PG&E in 2018.

HERON AND EGRET from page 1

“Consequently, they (chicks) often fledge into the street and either starve or get hit by cars. Sometimes they land badly and fracture bones.”

In January, the Oakland Zoo put out a call, offering four part-time positions responsible for rescuing these birds. Reinstating rescue efforts through a new three-year program, the Oakland Zoo is now taking the lead in protecting fledgling Black-crowned Night Herons and Snowy Egrets from unsafe living conditions in downtown Oakland.

“One of the big pieces is just being out there searching for birds, because by the time people call, most birds have been on the ground for a while facing the hazards of cars, dogs and people,” Colleen Kinzley, Oakland Zoo Vice President of Animal Care Conservation and Research, said.

Ever since they were spotted breeding downtown in 2010, these birds have faced the inherent dangers of nesting in an urban environment.

In 2015, in response to tree trimmers knocking down several active nests, Golden Gate Audubon, the Oakland Zoo and the International Bird Rescue formed a partnership to rescue threatened herons and egrets in downtown Oakland.

In 2017, a group of developers removed and pruned back many of the trees that were once used as nesting sites. During this process wildlife ecologists tried to relocate



Tony Pinsky

Egret release.

*Chicks are often starving, cold, and anemic at arrival so they require a lot of care for the first several days. Once they are feeling better they can eat about half their body weight daily.*

the nests to Lake Merritt in hopes that the herons and egrets would follow. After an unsuccessful season of relocation, the city decided to end monitoring and relocation attempts.

With no permanent solutions, Black-crowned Night Herons and Snowy Egret fledglings continue to end up on the street, making this latest effort by the Oakland Zoo an essential animal welfare project.

Using foldable cardboard pet carriers, trained staff will work together to secure and immediately transport birds to the Oakland Zoo to be assessed by a veterinary team. Rescued birds will then be taken to the International Bird Rescue on a daily basis if necessary.

“Chicks are often starving, cold, and anemic at arrival so (they) require a lot of care for the first several days,” Duerr explained. “Once they are feeling better and eating they have bottomless stomachs and can eat about half their body weight in fish each day. So we go through a whole lot of fish, plus vitamin and calcium supplements.”

After rehabilitation, the birds will be released back into more suitable habitats,

often in Santa Rosa and Alameda.

While the search and rescue operation for these birds is the primary aim for the Heron and Egret Rescue program, it’s not the only objective.

“What does it take to coexist with wildlife?” Kinzley, who created the program, asked. “Picking up birds every summer for three years is not the answer, we need to come up with something that’s good for birds and for people,”

Kinzley hopes the program will generate more discussion around long-term solutions. Oakland Zoo staff are in the process of creating flyers and postcards to help educate the public on the importance of habitat restoration as well as instructions for residents who happen to come across fledglings on the streets of downtown Oakland.

“If you find a young bird, put it in an appropriate sized box, leave it in a warm spot and we’ll come find it,” Kinzley said.

Interested in getting involved? The Oakland Zoo is looking for volunteers to assist the Heron and Egret Rescue project staff for various shifts throughout the day. Contact [ozvolserv@oaklandzoo.org](mailto:ozvolserv@oaklandzoo.org) for more information.



Isabel Luevano

Black-crowned Night Heron.

# HABITAT LOSS CAUSES PRETERNATURAL DISEASE OUTBREAK IN BIRDS

BY MARGARET HETHERWICK

In 2020, Portland Audubon reported a record botulism bloom that killed over 60,000 waterfowl in the Lower Klamath Basin. Just last year the entire West Coast saw the worst ever salmonella outbreak.

Diseases, as we are all well aware, spread quickly when individuals are physically close to one another. Unless the drought relents, 2022 could see another season of rampant disease in California waterfowl.

“It is anyone’s guess right now what water availability will be for wetland management in the fall,” said Melanie Weaver, waterfowl coordinator for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. “With drought causing reduced habitat, that will increase the risk of disease.”

Wetlands all over the state have been in dire straits for a long time. According to a 2021 study in *The Wildlife Society*, California leads the nation in wetland losses at 91 percent. The severe effects of habitat neglect are already being felt in Northern California.

“If you get the right combination of temperature and low water conditions, botulism can rear its ugly head,” said Mark Hennelly, vice president of advocacy for the California Waterfowl Association. “The more water you have out in the system, the less of a problem those diseases are.”

The Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge (LKNWR), a saddle-shaped wetland on the back of California, is a prime example. Despite 100,000-acre capacity, the LKNWR is often last in line for annual water allocations and received zero water in 2021.

“In the last 20 years, water problems have really curtailed the amount of waterfowl habitat, which has unfortunately had a significant impact on waterfowl populations,” said Hennelly.

If the Klamath Basin is any indicator for how habitat management curbs disease, then it may portend serious trouble for Bay Area birds.

While government entities have been fighting to reclaim and preserve land to benefit our native ecosystems, the best places for many birds to stop along the Flyway are not public lands.

“While the Department and the US Fish and Wildlife Service own and manage public areas that are wetlands, most of the habitat that our waterfowl depend on is privately owned, wildlife friendly agricultural

lands, such as rice in the Sacramento Valley and duck clubs,” said Melanie Weaver.

The relationship between conservation groups and landowners with wetland access is largely mutually beneficial. However, regulation of the land is at the discretion of the landowner, so any management strategies that help prevent disease must also benefit the land’s human use.

Until the refuges receive their due, California’s birds need our help. Encouraging an ecosystem to rely on human interference is not ideal, but Mark Hennelly says that the state of our habitats demands more support than a hands-off approach.

“If you want to try to restore what was once there and the health of the Flyway, you’re going to take care of the water problems that are on the refuges,” said Hennelly.



Snow and Ross's Geese.

Allen Hirsch

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Birdathon Auction

Starting in May, you can start bidding on amazing one-of-a-kind birding experiences and gear. From a new pair of Kowa Binoculars to a private plane ride where you can bird from the air, the Birdathon Auction has something for everyone. Check the Golden Gate Audubon website for more information.

### Earth Day

Join us to celebrate Earth Day on Saturday, April 16 at the Oakland Zoo. Golden Gate Audubon along with several other conservation organizations will be participating in this family-friendly event. Don't miss out on this wonderful opportunity to have fun learning about and protecting our planet.

### City Nature Challenge

Celebrate the incredible city streets and natural spaces of the Bay by taking part in the 2022 City Nature Challenge. Using the app iNaturalist to track your observations of plants, animals and fungi between April 29 and May 2nd, you can contribute important data during one of the world's largest community science events.



Corona Heights Park in San Francisco.

## BIRDING CORONA HILL: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY DOMINIK MOSUR

### LOCATION

Roosevelt and  
Museum Way  
San Francisco

*The hot  
east wind  
days can  
also blow in  
surprises.*

San Francisco is sprinkled with small parks ideal for birders on a time budget. One of my favorites is Corona Hill.

A lone outcrop on the northeast flank of the San Miguel Hills, this spot was once the site of a brick factory at the turn of the 20th century. Brickmakers used dynamite to rip the hill apart, extracting symmetrical layers of chert, a fine-grained sedimentary rock that makes up much of the bedrock in this part of San Francisco. As the city rushed to develop the last remnant scraps of open space at the end of the 1940s, parks superintendent Josephine Randall envisioned a public destination on top of this hill. The result was a park and museum juxtaposed against residential neighborhoods already sprawled across most other peaks of the growing city. Today 100,000 people visit Corona Heights Park and the Randall Museum each year.

When the weather heats up, big numbers of Violet-green Swallows, Vaux's Swifts, and in some years, Band-tailed Pigeons and Pine Siskins move through the Central California Coast. Over twenty species of raptors have been noted passing the hill in the past 15 years. The bulk of these are turkey vultures, accipiters and red-tails but rarer species like kites, harriers, and kestrels pass over regularly when conditions are prime. Depend-

ing on the strength of the east winds the previous night, skeins of White-fronts or Cackling geese may pass over into midday as they redirect back to the valley. The hot east wind days can also blow in surprises like Lewis's Woodpecker, Rock Wren and Townsend's Solitaire.

As the seasons pass into winter, birding Corona Hill slows down considerably. However, Northern Saw-whet Owl and Burrowing Owl have both shown up in late fall/early winter. All the expected western migrants pass through in April and May, with species like Lazuli Bunting and Ash-throated Flycatcher being especially well represented.

Because of its earlier history as a quarry, combined with the thousands of annual visitors, the site is extremely delicate to disturbance. The bird habitat; a mixture of restored chaparral, oak savanna, grassland, naturalized conifers and exotic eucalyptus is scattered across a mere 16 acres, and a sizeable portion of that open space includes, tennis and basketball courts, a dog run, a playground and three lawns.

In addition the park is dry, with no permanent water source outside of a couple of ephemeral springs, limiting the number of birds that make this a permanent home. However, even with these limitations, it's a great place to build up a good list on a day when things are on the move.

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Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact [rnakano@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:rnakano@goldengateaudubon.org).

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## “CATIOS” PROTECT CATS, BIRDS AND WILDLIFE

CYNTHIA CHOMOS

Catios, outdoor cat enclosures, keep cats safe, healthy, and happy while protecting birds and wildlife. Cynthia Chomos, catio designer and founder of Catio Spaces, will share the many ways you can create a visually appealing catio for your home and garden. Learn location considerations, building tips, resources, and get inspired to create a catio both you and your cat will enjoy!

Cynthia Chomos is passionate about design, nature, and cats. As the “go-to” catio expert and founder of Catio Spaces, she helps solve the indoor/outdoor cat dilemma to keep cats, birds, and wildlife safe while enjoying the enrichment of the outdoors.



Haven Catio by Catio Spaces.

ONLINE

Thursday, April 21  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

## BIRDING IS FOR EVERYONE

JOHN C. ROBINSON

John C. Robinson uses his own personal and transformational experiences to explain the multiple ways that inner city and minority youth and young adults can discover and appreciate nature through bird-watching. This presentation will focus on the barriers (and opportunities) to reaching a wider, more diverse audience to spread the message that “birding is for everyone.”

John C. Robinson is an African American professional ornithologist, an environmental consultant, a leader of birding and natural history tours, author and speaker. He holds a B.S. degree in Biology from Iowa State University and has published six books about nature and birds. For over 20 years, John has been an advocate for minorities in birdwatching. He is the author of *Birding is for Everyone: Encouraging People of Color to Become Birdwatchers* (2008).



John C. Robinson with students.

ONLINE

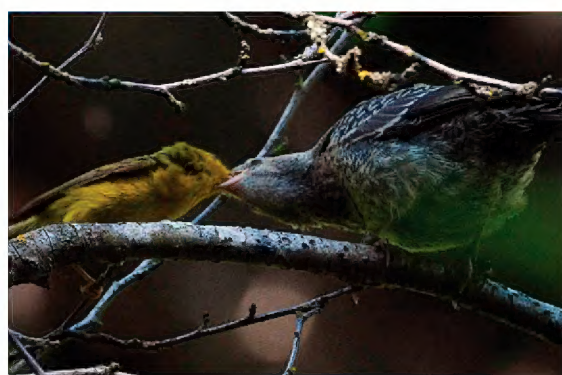
Thursday, June 2  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

## THE SECRET PERFUME OF BIRDS

DANIELLE WHITTAKER

The widespread belief that most birds have little sense of smell is a myth. Birds can produce complex scent signals that communicate with other birds and also play a role in foraging and navigation. Danielle’s research has uncovered how birds produce scents. Come learn why cowbirds smell like cookies, and why Crested Auklet colonies have a tangerine scent.

Danielle J. Whittaker is an evolutionary biologist and the managing director of the Center for Oldest Ice Exploration (COLDEX) at Oregon State University. Whittaker was previously managing director of the BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action at Michigan State University.



Cowbirds and Wilson’s Warbler.

ONLINE

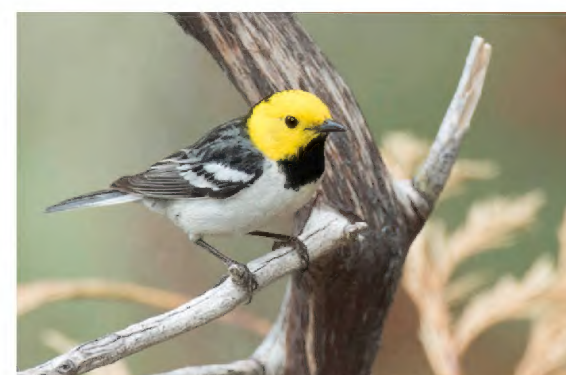
Thursday, May 19  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

## HOW DO NEW BIRD SPECIES ARISE?

SILU WANG

In the evergreen forest of the Pacific Northwest, two species of wood warbler that hybridize are on the brink of forming a new species. Leveraging genomic sequencing, field behavior experiment, climate and color pigment analyses, we have uncovered the evolutionary genetic basis of speciation in these very precious wood warbler species. Wang will also discuss why we should treasure existing wildlife species, as speciation is a reversible and treacherous process.

Born in China, Wang immigrated to Canada to study integrative biology. Wang earned her PhD at University of British Columbia, specializing in bird speciation. A Canadian with a globalist heart, Wang wishes for a harmonious biosphere for all lifeforms (including humans). In her spare time, she paints wildlife, dances, and enjoys outdoor sports. Visit her website at <https://www.silurianwang.net>.



Hermit Warbler.

ONLINE

Thursday June 16  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

**Our monthly Speaker Series is now online!**

To receive email alerts with links to each Zoom presentation, email us at [mturner@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:mturner@goldengateaudubon.org) and put “speaker series” in the subject line.

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#### 1 Heron and Egret Rescue

The Oakland Zoo takes the lead on rescuing fledgling heron and egrets from the unsafe conditions of their downtown rookeries.

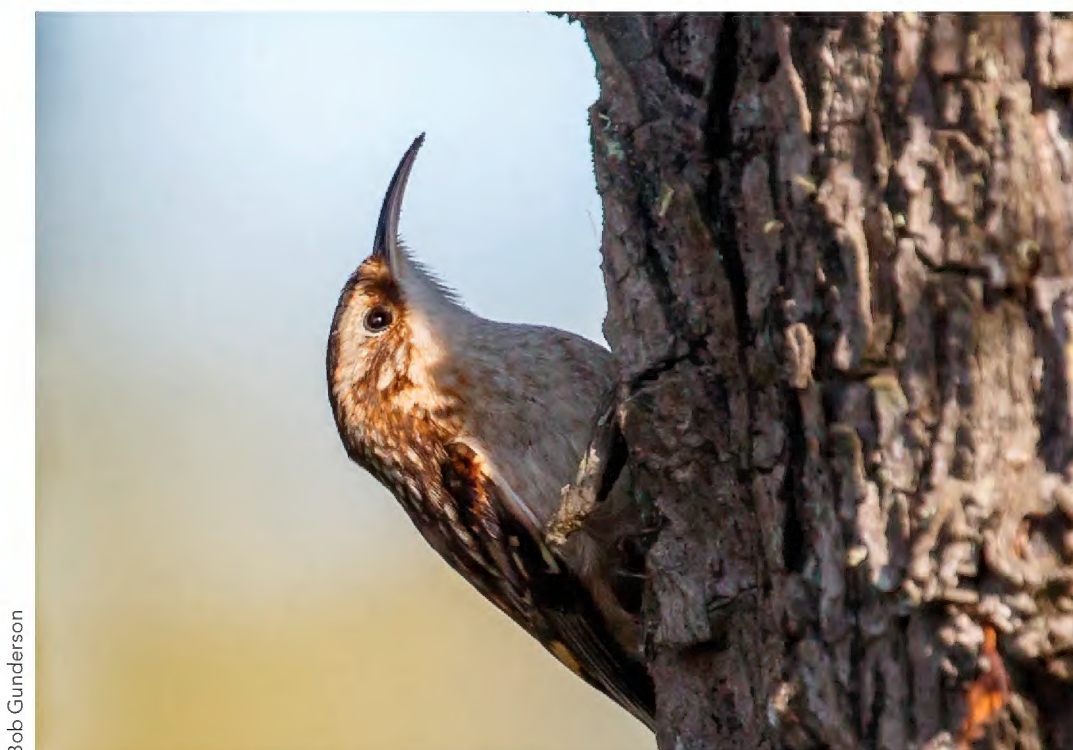
#### 4 Disease and Birds

During California's ongoing drought, waterfowl are at an increased risk of disease due to subsequent habitat loss.

#### 5 Corona Heights Park

The site of a former brick factory makes for the perfect birding hotspot on a time budget in San Francisco.

## BACKYARD BIRDER



Bob Gunderson

Brown Creeper.

## BROWN CREEPER

BY RYAN NAKANO

**B**ack in February while out at Wildcat Canyon, I spotted a small bird scuttling along the branch of a large oak. “You see that guy there, that’s a Brown Creeper,” Golden Gate Audubon Eco-Ed Director Clay Anderson pointed out. After watching it for a while, zig-zagging its way along the oak, stopping periodically to glean insects with its black untrimmed-catnail-of-a-beak, it seemed

more like a Brown “Tree Hugger” than anything.

Keeping their white bellies close against the tree they’re creeping, these tiny woodland birds are a joy to watch, that is if you can spot them first.

With their brown and white speckled feathers, they tend to blend right into the trees they inhabit, often compared to tree bark fighting gravity as they scale from trunk to crown.

Interestingly enough, these birds deploy a unique nesting strategy of using peeled tree bark to build hammock-like nests during the breeding season, beginning in early April.

Of course even if you don’t see one at first, eventually you’ll hear this songbird’s sharp reedy call. “See See”, as if to say “See me, See me”.

Once you do see the Brown Creeper, it’s hard to look away.

Maybe it has to do with the way in which its process seems so systematic. Often starting from the bottom of a trunk and working its way up in a spiral fashion until it is sure that it’s probed each and every crevice for a potential snack, the Brown Creeper flies back down to the ground to begin again somewhere else.

Observing this behavior I can’t help but think of the Drake lyric “Started from the bottom now we’re here” on loop.

Finding the largest trees in diameter, ensuring the largest amount of bark-dwelling insects, the Brown Creeper feasts primarily on arthropods with the exception of seeds in the winter months.

Unfortunately named, I will continue to call this beautiful bird the “Brown Tree Hugger” and keep my eyes out for its perpetual ascent.